MAKING PEACE
Matthew 5:9
Luke 19:41-44
March 24, 1968

There are several very moving, almost pathetic, scenes in the Gospel narrative. One of them was read in the New Testament Lesson this morning. A man weeping outside a city wall - a man about to die at the age of 33 - Hopes dashed, he had been misunderstood and despised by his own people. Now he was going to die, and he stood outside the Holy City of Jerusalem with tears running down his face and this is what he said: "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace."

It's a very touching picture, almost pathetic. It invites reflection on the 20,000 young Americans who have died in Vietnam; the armies of Israel that invaded Jordan last Thursday: the barbed wire and brick walls that criss-cross the landscape of the whole world. It invites reflection on a divided society with both sides feverishly preparing to wage war in the summer streets; It invites us to reflect on the fact that in even the simplest darenas of human interaction - our neighborhoods, schools, churches, men don't know much about "the things which makes for peace". It invites us to remember that a star shone over the entire mural of humanity and angels sang "Peace on Earth, Good will among men"; and the child grew to manhood and said "Blessed are the peacemakers". He wept outside the city. And that moving incident invites us to reflect that he must still be weeping.

Yet everyone is for peace. Beneath it all men like to feel they are laboring for peace. And perhaps they are. It's difficult to know, really, because the word "peace"is an enigma. Historians point to the middle years of the Roman Empire as the most peaceful era in the entire history of mankind. And the reason the Pax Romana was kept in those years was simply that the rule of Rome was severe and uncompromising.

Pax Britannica Americana

In one sense we have had peace in the world ever since the Japanese signed an unconditional surrender in 1945. But men have died in more than fifty small wars in those 23 years.

Some men have been committed to peace as the absence of war and bloodshed so deeply that no price was too great to pay. Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of Great Britain in the late thirties was such a man. And the judgment of history has been that his conduct was a drastic and terrible error. Making peace was not just as simple as refusing to engage in conflict.

Peace remains an enigma, and whatever it is, I think we can be sure that it is not just the absence of war. Peace is no more the absence of war, than love is the absence of hatred. The Old Testament word for peace comes from the Hebrew word "Shalom". That word indicates a "wholeness" - a feeling of complete fulfillment and well being. Involved in "Shalom" are physical health, prosperity, long life. The word was used as a common greeting: "Shalom"; to say that to another was to wish him the best of everything in life.

When the word "peace" appears in the New Testament, it includes all of this by way of background, plus the deeper understanding that in Jesus Christ something has happened to make true peace possible. "Grace by unto you and peace."

That's how Paul began his letters; that's how we begin our worship. And we mean that a very basic conflict has been resolved: a very basic problem has been solved. And that because of Jesus Christ, we have peace - whatever it means.

To be a "maker of peace" then, has something fundamental to do with Jesus Christ. It is not just spreading cheer and good will. It is not just avoiding conflict at any price whether between nations or individuals, or within the confines of a family circle.

As a matter of fact, if Jesus Christ was the Prince of Peace: if his disciples are makers of peace, we might come to a preliminary conclusion that peace, in the sense in which it is used in the New Testament, depends on a certain amount of conflict, and that to ignore that fact - to define peace as a state of nirvana, serene, quiet, without conflict, just might altogether eliminate any possibility of peace. That, in any case, is how I read the New Testament, Peace occurs after conflict, and in that sense conflict can be creative - depending, of course, on how it is handled.

It is a point well understood by those academic observers of human life - the sociologists. One of them, a very good one - Dr. James H. Laue - contends that '....some form of conflict, or competition, is present in all social interaction because of the nature of human institutions... conflict, or potential conflict, is a part of every situation and all societies and all groups develop some way of handling it." (The Creative Use of Conflict, The Episcopal Series: Parish of the Air - 11/5/67 -1/21/68)

That is to say - if we are concerned about making peace we need to begin with our feet planted firmly on the fround, in the acknowledgment that conflict is part of being human. Conflict - as potential conflict between nations, groups - every institution, individuals.

There are several ways in which we can cope with conflict. We can first of all, ignore it, in the name of peace. We can simply shut our eyes to real or potential conflict, hopeing that it will simply go away. But, of course, it never does. We can refuse to confront conflict - pushing it to the back of our minds, hoping that if we somehow ignore it long enough, it will not bother us.

It's a tempting way to deal with conflict, and a lot of men have made a lot of money telling people that the way to peace of mind - the way to resolve your conflicts, is to "think positively". That is - refuse to acknowledge that conflict exists. That is not only naive, it can be extremely dangerous, just as dangerous to a society or an individual, as was Neville Chamberlain's refusal to acknowledge the conflict between his government and Nazis. That is what is wrong with the "Power of Positive Thinking" and all the other formulas formulas for instant peace of mind. Implicit in all of them is the idea that the way to resolve conflict is to avoid it. I would suggest to you that when we do this we deny something very basic about our humanity: in a sense we dabble in self-deception. That's not what Jesus meant when he talked about peace. That's not what he did in his life.

A second wayd to cope with conflict is to express it violently; that is more honest than the first approach, but it is hardly creative. It seems to be the hue and cry of the revolutionary who would solve every problem by accentuating the areas of conflict. And inevitably conflict becomes an end in itself. Violence breeds more violence - until there is no redeeming possibility in sight.

A third way to cope with conflict begins with the difficult acknowledgment that it exists, and proceeds to try to manipulate it toward a creative end

peaceful conclusion. Winston Churchill knew a lot about conflict, and in October of 1940 he had the sensitivity to understand that if the English people didn't somehow begin to cope with the conflict they would perish. Specifically, the Londoners were hiding in their basements as the incendiary bombs fell, and their city was slowly being destroyed. "To the basements!", wrote Churchill, "must be replaced with 'to the kroofs!'" Many became adept and thousands of fires were extinguished before they took hold. The experience of remaining on the roof, night after night under fire, with no protection but a tin hat, soon became habitual. That was a creative maneuver, and it was that ability of Churchill's which made him a great man. The conflict was there: the Londoners were - symbolically and literally - hiding from it. And it would not be resolved until they got into it and saw it through. So it is with conflict on any scale. Peace is not accomplished by ignoring conflict.

As basic as that is, I think it is terribly important that we be reminded of it. It is a difficult time to be a Christian. We are called to be makers of peace in a day when there is no peace, internationally or within our own nation. As Christians we have a role to play: a job to do - and it is neither simple nor easy. We live in a time when great changes are taking place in our society: changes that have been brought about as the result of conflict. And the job of making peace is certainly something other than denying and ignoring the conflict. In fact, sometimes the job of making peace means provoking conflict - or at least getting the existing conflicts into the open, where they can, at least, be discussed. This is not easy: there are risks: there is always the possibility indeed the probability, that the peace maker will appear to be a trouble maker. That was and is the charge leveled at Christians who have involved themselves in the pressing and conflict-ridden social problems of our day. They have agitated and demonstrated and stimulated conflict, and change has occurred, change that holds the promise of peace.

That, after all, is a very basic human principle. In our bodies, virus may run unchecked and we will be ill. There has to be conflict, in the form of medication - perhaps some pain in the form of an injection. And then there will be peace.

A trip to the psychiatrist involves, not ignoring our conflicts, but opening up old wounds, dragging out old hostilities, looking honestly at them and coping with them, and it is likely to be painful. But it may be the only way to peace, or wholeness.

As a nation, as a church, and as individuals, we need nothing so much as to acknowledge that we are beset with conflicts. When and if civil disturbances occur we need to keep them in perspective: to see them as outbreaks of very deep seated and long term conflicts; we , of all people, ought to be demanding, not that the conflict be ignored, not that it be suppressed in ways that only magnify its intensity, but that our society begin to cope with it creatively. Now, I am not in any way condoning violence. I am suggesting that we must try to understand it, and more importantly that we do not interpret peace in this situation as simply the absence of gun fire. Peace means more than that. And making that peace is an unrewarding, risky business.

Making peace in the world means acknowledging conflict and working to eradicate those evils which cause conflict to express itself violently. It means that no Christian can breathe easily as long as discrimination of any form exists. It means that no Christian can talk glibly about peace while poverty continues to grind mercilessly on the underprivileged. Making peace in the world means getting directly involved in the world's problems and conflicts and working to resolve them creatively. It's risky business, but it is the business of Christians.

The same applies in interpersonal relationships - one of the most destructive forces in marriage is not conflict - but unexpressed and unresolved conflict. The most important function of a marriage counselor, many times, is just to get people talking with each other - to express the conflict. When that is accomplished the task is nearly complete.

In any group - even the family - there are conflicts - and they will be destructive until expressed: until some way appears to deal with them creatively.

Of course, it's impossible to discuss peace without looking at ourselves, in the church. Christians have never been very good at getting along with each other: people seem to argue and disagree just as vehemently inside the church as they do outside. Many a disillusioned church member has withdrawn at precisely this point, having come into the church expecting serenity and unity, and having discovered the same divisiveness and bickering that characterize other institutions. In response many a minister and Elder have interpreted the ordination vow to study the peace and unity of the church to mean that within these hallowed walls there will be no conflicts, no rocking the boat, no visible difference of opinion. Here we labor under a dangerous illusion. A church with no visible conflicts is not necessarily a peaceful church: it is probably a dishonest church. Here, of all places, we ought to be able to express our conflicts, to deal creatively with them, to openly acknowledge our differences of opinion. Here we shouldn't have to be something we are not. For here we are bound to each other in love - a love which transcends our conflicts and gives us the freedom to cope with them. If a person doesn't like me, I take quite a risk by expressing a difference of opinion with him. If, however, we are bound together in love, the situtation is different. I am free to be me. And he is free to be himself. That is the difference that ought to characterize the life of every congregation. Cen Smith man puts it this way: "Unless there is some conflict, reconciliation has no work to do."

We have thought about peace and conflict in very general terms, and what I have said this morning could well have been said anywhere. Or at least that is how it may seem. But I have said these things beneath a cross. It adorns this sanctuary, perhaps as a handsome piece of furniture, but in reality it symbolizes the deepest conflict of all - the conflict between the will of God and the will of man.

That conflict has been going on since the beginning of time. It is the theme of the Old Testament - God's will and Iman's will in conflict. God didnt ignore that conflict: he got deeply involved in it. He got right in the middle of it in the life of Jesus Christ. God and man in conflict - and that same Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross.

You and I are caught up in that conflict. God's will is not our will. It is likely that you and I would have responded to the person of Jesus Christ in the same way as the first century Jews.

The Godd, and redeeming news of the Gospel is that that conflict has been expressed to its fullest. God became a participant in it. Because of the cross, because the conflict is out in the open, because God took it upon himself, there can be peace. Before he died Jesus said this to his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." And on the first day of the week, when he startled those men who had given him up for dead he greeted them with one word - "Peace."

Unexpressed conflict separates us from each other. Unexpressed conflict separates us from God. But the cross is the symbol that the conflict has been expressed. It's all over. God has already acted to take us back as his children.

That is the peace of Jesus Christ. And that is what he has called us to be making in the World.

Amen.